

LOS ANGELES TIMES
26 May 1985

CIA Firmly Rejects Blame in Beirut Blast

But Incident Raises Contentious Issues for Intelligence Watchdogs

By ROBERT C. TOTH, *Times Staff Writer*

WASHINGTON—Despite a presidential order authorizing the CIA to train foreign counterterrorist squads in Lebanon, the CIA insists—apparently to the satisfaction of the congressional intelligence committees—that it bears no responsibility for a car bombing in Beirut March 8 that claimed more than 80 lives.

Senior career CIA officers opposed the presidential order—rescinded soon after the March 8 bomb attack—for fear that the agency would not be able to control the counterterrorists it trained, sources said. But the CIA drew up plans to carry out the order, which President Reagan issued in November to deter terrorist attacks such as those that killed more than 300 Americans in 1983 and 1984.

Regardless of whether the CIA played a role in the bombing, the incident raises other contentious issues that will continue to roil relations between the intelligence community, Congress and the press:

—President Reagan's order authorized the CIA to train and support three counterterrorist teams that could kill, if necessary, to prevent new strikes against U.S. facilities. Although any resulting deaths were to have been considered "preemptive self-defense" carried out by foreigners, many members of Congress believe that the order barely skirted the ban on assassination under which all U.S. intelligence agencies operate.

—The March 8 bombing demonstrated the danger posed by surrogate counterterrorism squads in highly unstable Lebanon. But the United States helps train and equip the counterterrorism forces of more than 24 other nations, although it provides no weapons, and

the potential remains for the CIA to be linked to a "runaway mission."

—The current leaders of the House and Senate intelligence committees were not briefed on last November's presidential order. Reagan exercised his option last year to inform only each committee's top Republican and Democrat on this highly sensitive subject but all four committee leadership jobs turned over in January.

—The U.S. intelligence community concluded that press reports linking the CIA to the March 8 bombing caused an "increased threat" to Americans in the Middle East. U.S. diplomats and missions in the region were warned of greater danger. After terrorists holding four American and two French hostages in Lebanon issued new demands that their comrades in Kuwaiti jails be freed, there were unconfirmed reports of U.S. Sixth Fleet movements toward the Eastern Mediterranean.

Under plans to implement the November presidential order, an officer in the Lebanese intelligence service was to select foreign counterterrorists for CIA training. U.S. Army Special Forces units from Ft. Bragg, N.C., were to provide the training at a clandestine camp in Lebanon to be provided by the Lebanese officer. The agency even set aside \$100,000 to begin the operation.

But CIA officials concluded that the Lebanese officer, who repeatedly hedged his commitment to the scheme, either would be unable to control the counterterrorists once

they were trained or was planning to use the teams for his own purposes under CIA guise.

Before the CIA could put its plans into motion, President Reagan rescinded his authorization of the counterterrorist operation in the wake of the March 8 bombing in Beirut. Despite the bloodshed in that attack, the intended victim, Sheik Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah, emerged unhurt. Fadlallah, a militant Shia Muslim, is believed by the CIA to be responsible for the anti-American terrorist attacks that killed more than 300.

The process of canceling Reagan's directive may have been under way even before the March 8 bombing, but the bombing probably speeded it up. There is still no

reliable information on who hired the bombers, according to reliable sources, although the Lebanese officer is chiefly suspected.

After the Washington Post, in a May 12 story also printed in The Times, linked the bombing to the CIA operation, CIA officials went before the House and Senate intelligence committees behind closed doors to deny any responsibility.

Committee members have been noticeably silent about the incident since then, and officials familiar with the hearings say they accepted, at least tentatively, the CIA account. But both committees intend to pursue the matter further.

Robert B. Oakley, director of the State Department's office for combating terrorism, branded news reports linking the CIA to the March 8 bombing as "outrageous." And a senior department official who asked not to be identified

Continued

added: "We get very upset when our people are jeopardized and particularly so when it's unnecessary. That story was based on a connection that did not exist."

Reagan's order authorizing CIA involvement had its roots in a presidential national security directive signed last spring that outlined the Administration's anti-terrorist policy. The directive's premise, as presidential national security adviser Robert C. McFarlane said recently, was that "the very threat of terrorism represents aggression and warrants acts of self-defense." Both he and Secretary of State George P. Shultz have specifically endorsed "preemptive" action to prevent terrorism and to retaliate against it.

Last fall, after the bombing in Lebanon of the U.S. embassy annex, McFarlane and Shultz led efforts to set up counterterrorist

teams that could take preventive and punitive action. Two earlier presidential orders, including one under which the United States has been training personnel of "dozens" of other nations in counterterrorism techniques, could have provided the CIA with sufficient basis for proceeding in Lebanon.

But senior career officers at the CIA argued that counterterrorism squads in Lebanon could do more harm than good. They could not be relied upon to obey U.S. orders, these officers said, and they could create martyrs in whose name increased terrorist acts against the United States would be mounted if, as likely, a U.S. connection to their deaths was established.

They also feared that the CIA would take the rap for whatever went wrong and may have insisted, with CIA director William J. Casey concurring, that the President sign

a specific new directive to authorize training counterterrorists.

Perhaps as added insurance that the CIA would not again be branded a "rogue elephant," the President signed the new order at the end of November. It specifically authorized the agency to train and support several counterterrorist teams of Lebanese and other foreigners—no number of teams or personnel was mentioned—who could be used when the United States learned that a strike against U.S. personnel or facilities was imminent.

The CIA did not believe that deaths caused by U.S.-trained counterterrorists would violate the ban on assassinations imposed on U.S. intelligence agencies in 1976. Its officials contended that, if there is proof that a terrorist intends to kill, then killing him first is self-defense.